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Louise Hardwick, *Joseph Zobel: Négritude and the Novel*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. ix + 275 pp. £80.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-78694-073-5.

Review by Martin Munro, Florida State University.

One of the first Caribbean books I read was Joseph Zobel's *Et si la mer n'était pas bleue*, his 1982 collection of short stories. It was taught in a first-year French literature class, and was chosen, I think, because it was a relatively "light" read, accessible to students at that level, and yet with enough substance to warrant serious critical study. There were stories of childhood, of the Nardal sisters in Paris, of a narrator figure relocated from Martinique to Senegal. There was certainly a lightness of touch, but one sensed also a seriousness, one wrought from experience, and that the apparent lightness was a means of distilling that experience, its frustrations, disappointments, its bitterness, even. In short, the book signaled that reading Caribbean literature was not a simple affair, that it would be an error to mistake surface sweetness or lightness for an absence of real, hard-won wisdom and insight, much as one should not take the sweet melodies of Caribbean music as signs of carefree living or an easy relationship with history.

I saw the film of *La Rue Cases-Nègres* before I read the novel. Somewhat against the way that the short story collection was taught, the general feeling among scholars toward the novel and film was that it was light, lacking the critical weight or the stylistic innovation of the prominent Francophone Caribbean authors of the time—Glissant, the *créolistes*, or even Césaire, who was a contemporary of Zobel, and whose more impenetrable, more difficult work arguably overshadowed Zobel's. Euzhan Palcy's film opens with some postcard-style images of plantation life in Martinique, sepia-tinted to suggest nostalgia, which is reinforced by the ragtime-style music, which sets the film in time, and is no doubt inviting and familiar to non-Caribbean audiences. Again, however, these stylistic touches are deceptive, as the film, like the novel, portrays the daily hardships of life on a sugar plantation in rural Martinique, in conditions that have barely changed since the end of slavery nearly a hundred years before. The film presents broken families, children destined to work on the plantations, aged men and women living and dying in a system that entraps them, making them slaves to it. The classic Caribbean theme of education is also prevalent, and is viewed, as in one memorable scene where a schoolteacher writes the maxim on the blackboard, as "the second key to our emancipation." Through the sacrifices of a stoic, loving grandmother, the narrator figure José is "freed" from life on the plantation, though he feels no less alienated and out of place as he progresses through the colonial school system. The film actually stops before the point at which the narrator of the novel becomes profoundly disenchanted with education, seeing it as a sort of betrayal of his family and community. Thus, the film and the novel are powerful, enduring works on the workings of

colonial societies, which either trap the poor in their poverty, or else leave them to feel profoundly lost and in a way exiled if they dare to step into the world of education, which turns out not to be the straightforward key to freedom that the schoolmaster said it would be.

It is no doubt a testament to the novel's intrinsic qualities that it has tended to overshadow the rest of Zobel's considerable oeuvre and has, as Louise Hardwick says, led to Zobel being seen as something of a "one-hit wonder" (p.1). Critics have more or less ignored the rest of Zobel's work, and as Hardwick argues, this "has impeded deeper analysis of his wider body of sophisticated and ideologically radical novels," and limited the academic understanding of *La Rue Cases-Nègres* in the wider oeuvre, and in the broader sphere of Caribbean literature (p. 2). It is one of the many strengths of this study that it situates that novel in its rightful relationship with the rest of Zobel's work, which includes journalism, short stories, poetry, spoken word, radio, sculpture, and painting. This meticulously researched book persuasively makes the case for Zobel as a key and necessary figure in any understanding of the evolution of Francophone Caribbean literature and culture in the twentieth century.

While the study pays due attention to the whole of Zobel's output, it does, as its title suggests, foreground the novels and argue for Zobel to be considered as the most important novelist of Négritude. This is a new and quite bold claim on behalf of Zobel's work, partly because Négritude has long been seen as something of the preserve of the original triumvirate of Césaire, Senghor, and Damas. In my own limited work on Zobel, I argued that he was a "post-Négritude" novelist, an argument that Hardwick challenges, convincingly proposing that Négritude should not be seen in such narrow terms, and that Zobel is more or less a contemporary of Césaire, having published his first novel in 1945, only six years after the first publication of the poet's famous *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.

Indeed, the very fact of writing fiction would seem to exclude Zobel from the poetry and essay-driven Négritude movement, but again Hardwick argues for the novels to be taken as part of that movement, given that they "contest French cultural and political dominance" (p. 4). Zobel's originality as a Négritude writer is that he uses the novel to explore and represent the experiences of the colonized underclasses. Zobel places, Hardwick says, "for the first time, the lives of the poorest and most marginalized Martinicans at their centre" (p. 4). Far from the virtually impenetrable, obscure poetry of Césaire, or indeed from the opaque poetics of Glissant, Zobel writes "from the viewpoint of a sympathetic insider, through accessible prose narrative" (p. 4). As she further argues, "Zobel's longevity as an author and cultural figure owes more to his enduring appeal in non-academic circles than to any official forms of academic consecration" (p. 4).

Zobel's biography—his childhood on a rural plantation, his uneasy progression through the colonial educational system, his precarious economic status—is used by Hardwick to reinforce the author's working-class credentials and to lend authenticity to his representations of the hardships of life for the descendants of the enslaved in Martinique. Zobel's novels "apply the movement's more abstract concepts about race to real settings by showing racial pride in black identity as an integral aspect of the everyday lived experiences of poor Martinicans" (p. 10). Zobel's emphasis on lived experience echoes in fact Frantz Fanon's own shift in that direction, most famously in *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Fanon is certainly quite trenchant in his critique of the more mystical elements of Négritude in his phenomenological-psychoanalytical study of colonized Martinique, but Zobel's subtle, gentle representations of everyday experience do in

their own ways mark a break with Négritude, or else, as Hardwick says, add to it by applying and adapting abstract ideas to quotidian reality. Or, perhaps it is rather that he begins and ends with quotidian reality, and any ideas that emerge are never abstract, but shaped by the exploration of the everyday.

Hardwick, unlike many postcolonial critics, is particularly strong on social class, insisting on its importance as a determining factor both in Zobel's work and in the structure of colonial societies. She is throughout sensitive to the workings of social class, particularly the way it reflects and reinforces race and color and is a constant constraint on the aspirations of working-class characters in Zobel's work. Supported in large part by an AHRC Fellowship, Hardwick's work benefits greatly from the exhaustive, meticulous research she has carried out, and constitutes a definitive statement on the life and work of this remembered, but forgotten and underestimated author, Joseph Zobel who, as Hardwick states in a memorable phrase, "put the *nègre* into Négritude" (p. 37).

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